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Mentors’ Perceptions of the *Ready for Life* Program: An Inclusion Program at Hope College

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INTRODUCTION

About Ready for Life (RFL)

Ready for Life (RFL) is a postsecondary college experience provided for students with cognitive, learning or social disabilities. RFL uses a blended curriculum design to create a rounded and wholesome program through which students can obtain a certificate in Life Studies after four years as a full time student.

Students in RFL are integrated into typical Hope College courses with students in the regular education setting while simultaneously taking courses within the RFL classroom.

The program incorporates individual, personalized goals for each RFL student so he or she is adequately prepared for the real world.

Aims of the Study

To gather perceptions from Hope College students who serve as tutors in the RFL program in terms of tutor responsibilities, time spent, and recommendation to others looking at participating in this unique program.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

We surveyed the Hope College RFL mentors at the end of the Spring 2013 semester to determine their opinions of the program, using the following questions:

1. What year are you at Hope College?
2. What major are you?
3. If you are majoring in Education – what certification are you going to be endorsed in?
4. Why are you volunteering at Ready For Life?
5. What were your main responsibilities while volunteering at RFL?
6. How much additional time do you WEEKLY spend with the Ready for Life students OUTSIDE of the committed classroom time?
7. What do you do during the additional time?
8. What have you learned about volunteering at Ready for Life?
9. In regards to your responsibilities, please write a short paragraph about what you have learned about volunteering in Ready for Life.
10. How many semesters have you volunteered at Ready for Life?
11. Would you like to volunteer at Ready for Life in the future?
12. Would you recommend that others volunteer for Ready for Life?
13. Do you have any other comments on concerning Ready for Life? If so, please write these comments below.

PROCEDURES

A survey was created with input from Ready for Life director. A pilot was conducted with two outside experts on surveys and knowledge about the program. After the pilots, the survey was revised. This revised survey was used in the research project.

After the semester was completed and tutoring was finished, the Hope College RFL tutors were asked to voluntarily complete a survey concerning their perception of the Ready for Life program. Of the total of 20 tutors, all participated (100%) The survey had 12 questions querying demographic information, main responsibility as a tutor, time spent, activities during this time, and what was learned through this tutoring time with the Ready for Life students. Demographic results of all the surveys were placed into a statistical software program. Qualitative results were initially read then put into noted themes. Both qualitative and quantitative results are noted and reported.

DATA ANALYSIS METHODS

Quantitative Analysis: Using SPSS, descriptive statistics concerning the demographics of the subjects were completed on the following: (1) year at Hope College (2) Major (3) If education, what certification will you be endorsed with upon completion (4) reason for volunteering at RFL (5) which class (if any) are you receiving credit for and (5) main responsibility at RFL.

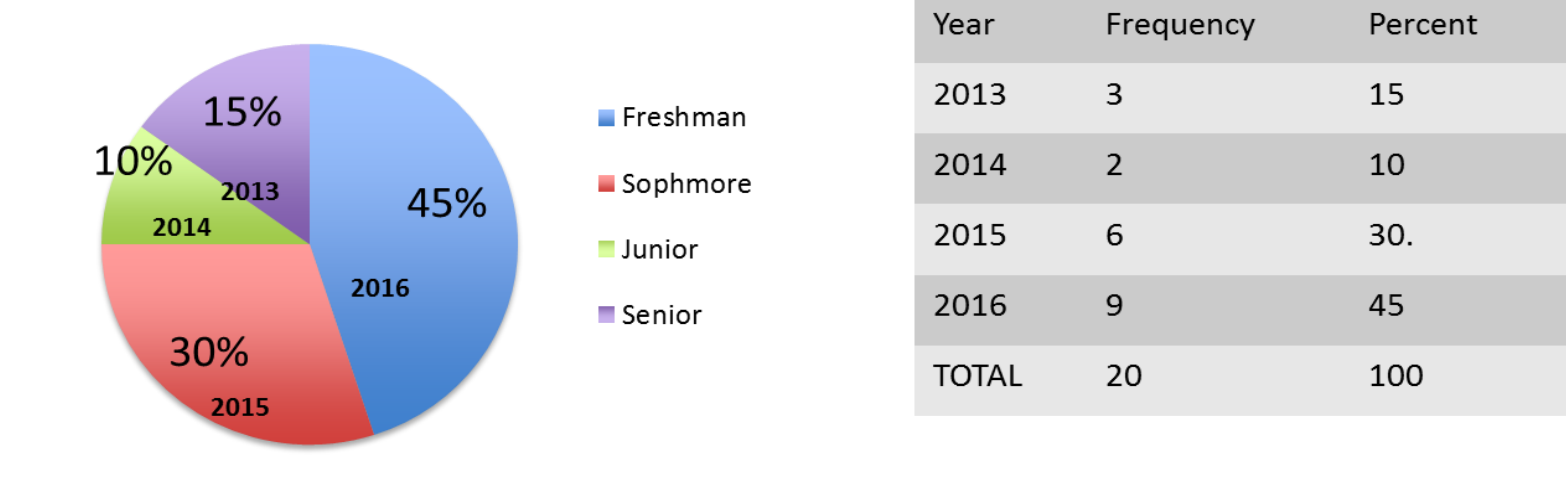
Qualitative Analysis: After reviewing the results, we identified and wrote down initial code categories. We did this separately to independently analyze the same data to determine if we arrived at similar conclusion; if disagreement occurred, our professor independently analyzed the data and a final decision was made. This technique help confirm that we understood the responses, thereby ensuring trustworthiness and enhancing the credibility or validity of the data

DESCRIPTION OF SUBJECTS (DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS)

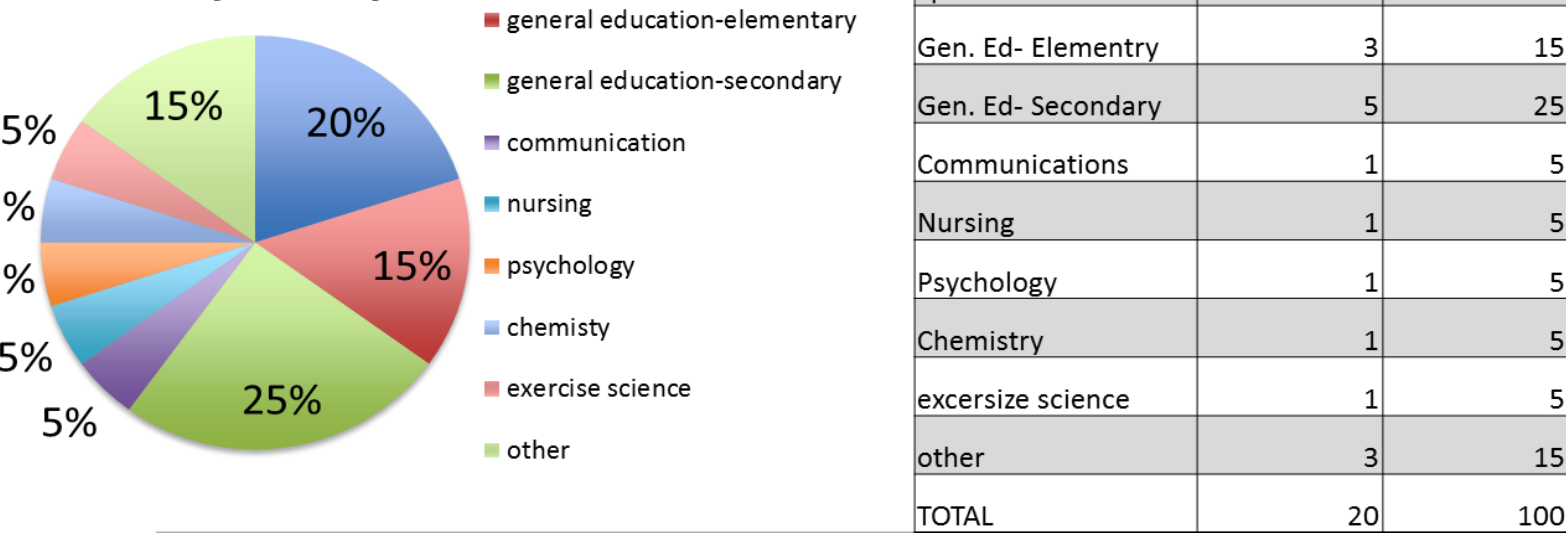
Data was collected on the Hope College RFL mentors ($n=20$) pertaining to the mentor's anticipated graduation date, education certification, reason for volunteering, what class they're volunteering for, and what their main responsibilities were in the RFL classroom.

RESULTS OF SURVEY

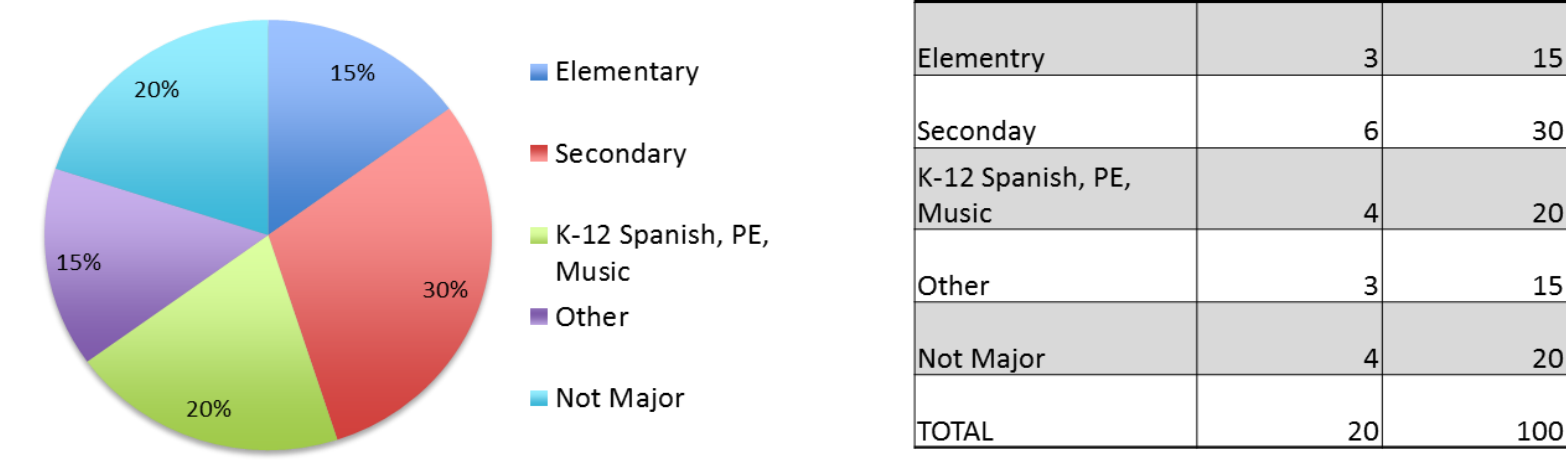
What year are you at Hope?



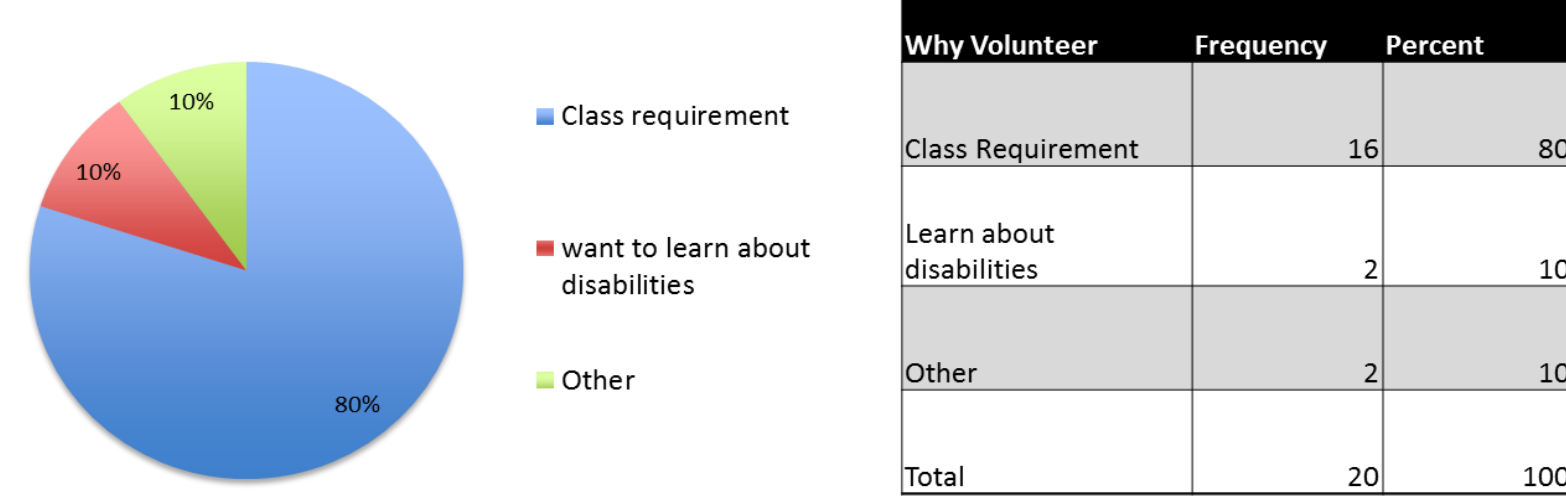
What major are you?



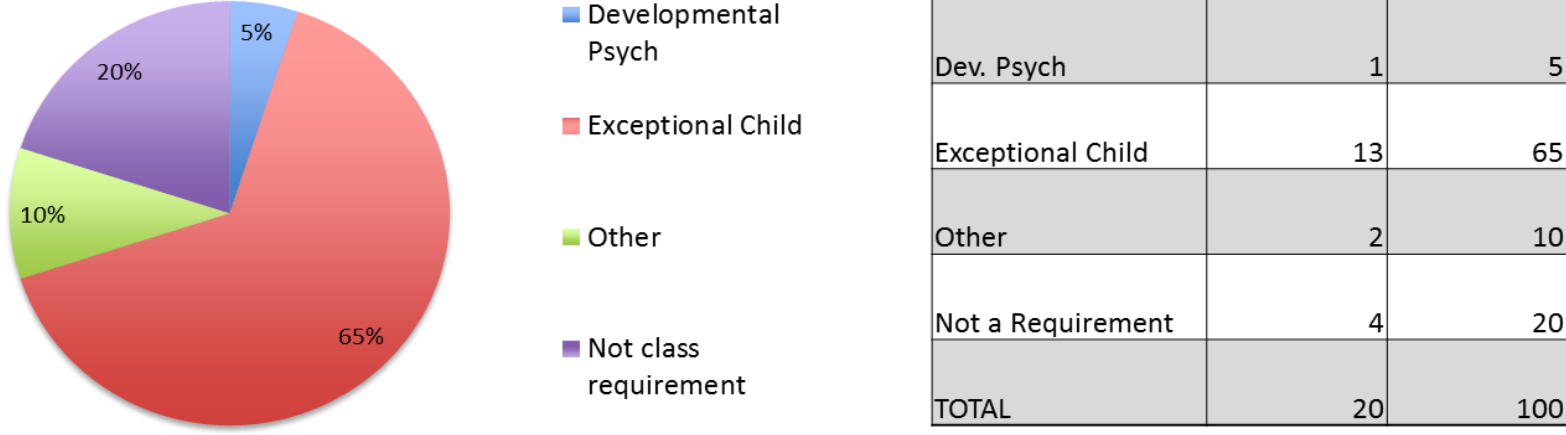
Education Endorsement Area



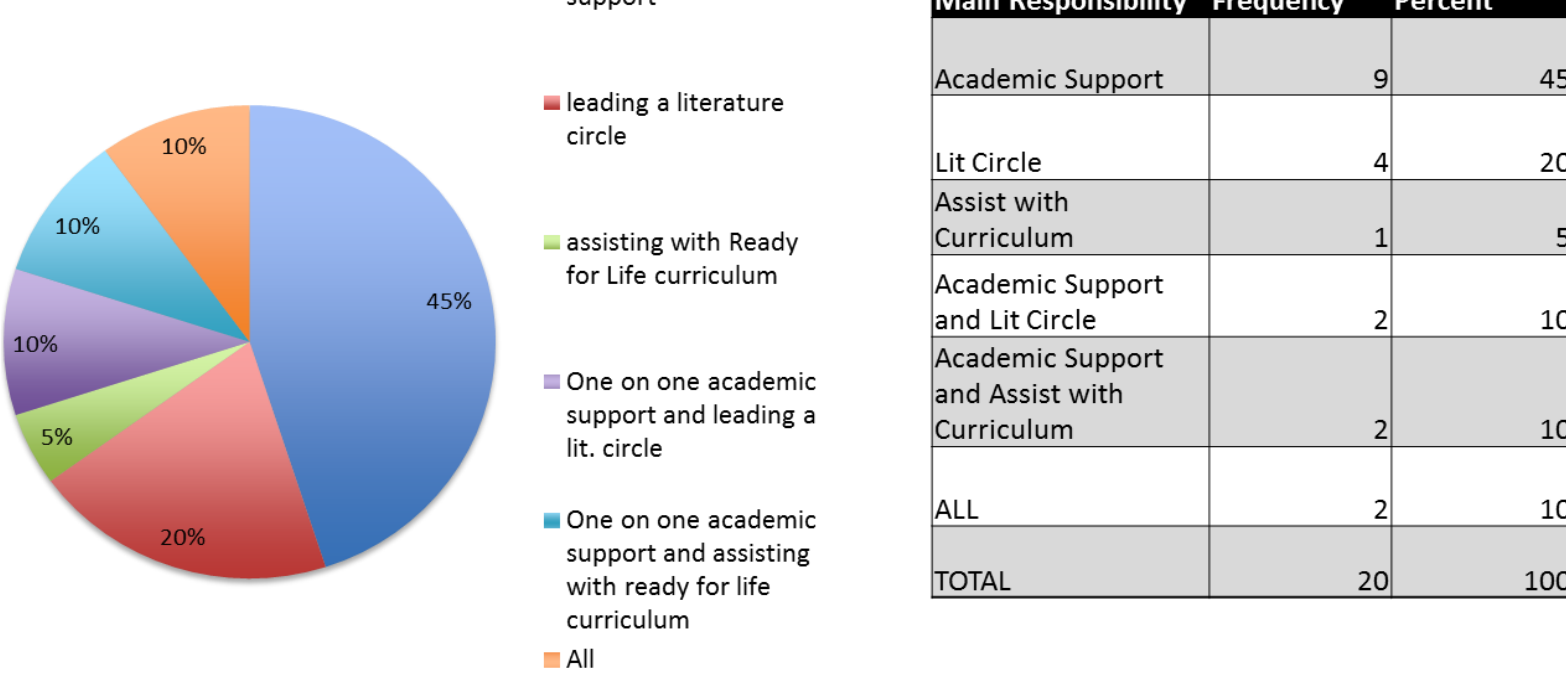
Why Volunteer?



What class are you volunteering for?



Main Responsibility



Quantitative Analysis

A total of twelve questions were asked on the survey distributed to Ready for Life mentors. The descriptive statistics results described the breakdown on the respondents in terms of major, year graduation date, reason for volunteering and main responsibilities.

The following information is additional quantitative data that was gathered from the survey:

Q. How much additional time do you weekly spend with the Ready for Life students OUTSIDE of the committed classroom hours?

Twenty five percent of mentors who were surveyed responded that they spent 1-2 hours outside of the classroom with Ready for Life students. 40% of the mentors responded that they spend a weekly average of ½ hour with the RFL students outside of the classroom.

Q. What do you do during the additional time?

When the mentors responded that they spend additional time with the RFL students outside of the classroom, they were asked what activities they did. 30% of mentors responded that they eat lunch with the RFL students, attend Hope events, and attend chapel.

Q. What have you learned about volunteering at Ready for Life?

The mentors were asked what they learned from volunteering at Ready for Life and were given a list of which they could check all that applied to their personal learning experience. 65% of mentors replied that they learned about people with disabilities, about how people learn best, and about the focus of RFL.

Q. How many semesters have you volunteered at Ready for Life?

Seventy percent of the mentors who were surveyed have been volunteering at RFL for only one semester. The responses ranged from students who have only been there for one semester, to two students who have been with RFL for four semesters.

Q. Would you like to volunteer at Ready for Life in the future?

The mentors were given the option of answering whether or not they wanted to return to volunteer at RFL with a “yes” or a “no”, and 90% responded yes.

Q. Would you recommend that others volunteer for Ready for Life?

Hundred percent of Ready for Life mentors responded that they would recommend others to volunteer in the RFL classroom.



Qualitative Analysis

Two of the questions asked on the survey were prompts that required a free response by the mentor completing the survey. The first free response question was the ninth question in the packet, and it asked the mentor to explain what they have learned from volunteering with Ready for Life. Many responses that were received indicated that the mentors’ perspective had been changed and that they had learned a lot about people with disabilities. Multiple responses also included indication that the mentors learned to handle certain behaviors in uncomfortable situations. The mentors obtained new skills they did not previously possess, and a few mentors changed their major or some of their life's goals because of their experiences in the Ready for Life program.

Here is an example of a response to this question: "I have learned how special the students are at Ready for Life. They are truly motivated individuals and I look forward to spending the rest of college volunteering with these students."

The second free response question asked for additional comments from the mentors about their volunteer experience with RFL. Most mentors commented that they thought their experience was fun and rewarding and that they gained a better perspective of individuals with special needs. Many responses also included positive reviews of RFL as a program and of Emily as the instructor, as well as other program attributes.

An example response to this free response question follows: "Amazing experience. Emily is very flexible, kind, and easy to work with. The students are so fun and positive."

DISCUSSION

This study shows that more freshman (45%) and sophomores (30%) volunteered at Ready For Life program than juniors and seniors combined (25%). Sixty percent of the total ($n=12$) were education majors, and while 80% ($n=16$) were volunteering because of a class requirement. Fifty percent of these tutors ($n=10$) were volunteering for the *Exceptional Child* class.

RFL was a fulfilling volunteer activity because RFL 90% ($n=18$) of the mentors said that they repeat this placement. These same respondents indicating that their experience as a RFL tutor was positive and enjoyable. All of the mentors (100%, $n=20$) responded that they would recommend a friend to volunteer at Ready For Life, thus the volunteers gave RFL a high endorsement.

When asked what was learned through this specific volunteering, a majority of these mentors responded that the experience changed their perspective of students with special needs and helped them learn more about different types of disabilities. When queried about this experience, an overwhelming majority of the mentors described their time with the RFL students rewarding as well as enjoyable.

These individuals also positively commented on the instructor of the program and on Ready For Life as a whole. The instructor (Emily Perton) was approachable and encouraging to the mentors as well as an outgoing advocate of the RFL program.

LIMITATIONS and Future Research

1. Findings are limited because of the number of tutors that were surveyed.
- Future research could survey more tutors as well as the Ready for Life students and professors.